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ABSTRACT

This study examined relations between children's humor, behavioral characteristics, acceptance by peers in kindergarten and primary school, and self-perceptions. Subjects were 35 kindergarten, 88 fourth grade, and 95 eighth grade Norwegian children. For all students, assessments included sociometric ratings of classmates, teacher assessments of children's behavioral characteristics, and children's assessments of their own social behavior. Eighth graders also completed a peer assessment measure. Analysis indicated that kindergarten children's humor as assessed by their teachers was not consistently related to peer acceptance or rejection, or to self-perceived humor and behavior. For school-age children, the study used a theoretical model to analyze predictive relations between humor, behavioral characteristics, acceptance by peers, and self-perceptions of humor. For eighth graders, humor was found to be predictive of self-perceptions of humor; and humor as assessed by peers predicted peer acceptance. Self-perceptions of social competence were related to students' perceptions of their own humor. For fourth graders, no direct links from humor were found, but self-perception of humor still affected perceived social competence. (MM)

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SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND HUMOR IN PRESCHOOL AND SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

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Abstract

Relations between children's humor, behavioral characteristics, acceptance by peers in kindergarten and school, and self-perceptions are examined in the present paper. In a sample of preschool children (aged 4 to 7 years) humor as assessed by their teachers was not consistently related to peer acceptance or rejection, or to self-perceived humor and behavior. A theoretical model is presented to analyze predictive relations between humor, behavioral characteristics, acceptance by classmates, and self-perceptions of humor and social competence in school-aged children. The model was tested on a sample of 4th and 8th grade students, with teacher assessment (in grade 8 also peer assessment) of humor and behavioral characteristics. In general, results were consistent with the model for 8th grade students with peer measures of humor and behavior. Humor was predictive of perception of own humor, and, when assessed by peers, humor also predicted peer acceptance. Self-perceptions of social competence were affected directly by students' perception of their own humor. Thus humor was linked indirectly to perceived social competence. In grade four no direct links from humor were found, but self-perception of humor still affected perceived social competence.

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Introduction

Recent studies have suggested that there are close connections between certain behavioral characteristics in children and their functioning in peer groups. Aggressive behavior has been shown to be the primary negative correlate of acceptance, while cooperativeness and prosocial behavior is closely associated with positive social status at all ages (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990). Until now few studies have related children's use of humor to their acceptance by peers and their perception of own social competence. There are results to indicate that timid, rejected children have a low sense of humor (Williams & Asher, 1988), that friendship is promoted through the sharing of humor (Foot, 1986), that active social interaction enhances children's humor behavior (Søbstad, 1990), and that adolescent humorists are more popular than their less humorous peers (Ziv, 1984). McGhee (1989) suggests that children who become skilled in producing humor in social contexts tend to be more popular among their peers and find it easier to develop new friendship than other children, and that the timely and effective use of humor is an important component of social competence. Sherman (1985) argues that "if humorous behavior is a social skill facilitating acceptance, its absence may produce social distance in children". According to Masten (1986) there seems to be a functional relation between lack of humor behaviors and social isolation.

Little attention has been given to the possible links between humor, perception of own humor and perceived social competence.

The aims of the present study were;

1) to learn about the social correlates of humor in children

2) to examine the relationships between humor, behavioral characteristics, peer acceptance, and perceived social competence in children of different ages

3) to develop a model for empirical analysis of these relationships, and to test the model as a whole.

When analysing perceived social competence, we make a distinction between self-perception of peer acceptance and self perception of social behavior, as suggested by Wheeler & Ladd (1982).

Theoretical model

Our proposed model (Figure 1) begins with humor and behavioral characteristics which are linked to acceptance by peers and, directly or indirectly, to self perceptions. Humor and prosocial behavior are hypothesized to affect peer acceptance positively, and externalizing and internalizing behavior are expected to have an adverse influence on peer acceptance, as suggested by existing empirical evidence. Humor is hypothesized to have a positive impact on children's perception of own humor, and tentatively we expect humor to be predictive of perceived acceptance by peers. These hypothesized processes are not based on empirical evidence. Our line of reasoning follows from McGhee (1989), who claims that the appreciation and creation of most humor requires social "know-how". This social awareness and sensitivity in humorous children is likely to affect their perception of own social behavior and acceptability. Some humorous children, for instance those who are known to be funny class clowns, clever at telling stories, or famous for their play with words, may often be aware of their own abilities. Class clowns

have higher attention-seeking than other children (Damico & Purkey, 1978), and we believe that this also is indicative of their being conscious of own behavior and status, especially when founded on funny behavior.

Peer acceptance is hypothesized to be predictive of self-perception of social competence in our model, but ties are not expected to be strong. As indicated by early studies in the field, reviewed by Stensaasen (1970), there seems to be no clear relationship between actual and perceived sociometric status. To our knowledge no studies have investigated the relation between peer acceptance and self-perception of social behavior. In general there may be a tendency among some (agressive) children to overestimate their own competence and to show inaccurate self-perceptions (Asher et al., 1990).

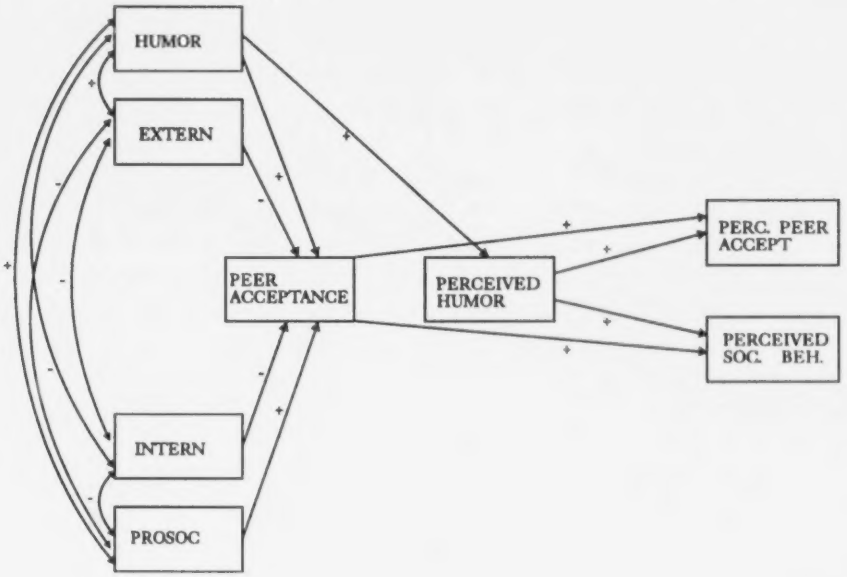

Figure 1. The theoretical model

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 35 preschool children (aged 4 to 7 years) from two kindergarten groups, 88 4th grade students (aged 10 to 11 years) and 95 8th grade students (aged 14 to 15 years) from 5 fourth grade classes in 3 elementary schools and 4 eight grade classes in 2 middle schools in a Norwegian city and a neighbouring community.

Procedure

Preschool children were individually interviewed by one of the authors and a trained research assistant. The 4th and 8th grade students completed their questionnaires in two different periods. The instruments were administered to whole classes by two trained research assistants and one of the authors. Items were read aloud by the assistants, partly to ensure that all students understood them, and partly to make all students go through the questionaire simultaneously. Teachers completed a behavior rating measure for each student in their class. As teachers work in teams (usually 3-person teams) with the classes involved in this study, they also preferred to make team assessments. Also preschool teachers and their assistants made team assessments of children's behavior.

Instruments.

Sociometric measures. The main criteria of the sociometric test were playmate in kindergarten, friendship and workmate in schools. The criteria were selected to obtain information about relationships which are intrinsically rewarding (friendship) and relationships in which the instrumental value (success in play situations or when working with group tasks) is more prominent. The unlimited method of choice was applied. In kindergarten a negative nomination question ("who would you rather not play with") was also included. This could not be done in the schools. For the school students a perceptual part of the sociometric test was formulated in terms of guesses. The students were asked to guess by whom they expected to be chosen as friend and workmate.

Teacher assessment of children's behavioral characteristics. Teachers rated students on five behavioral dimensions: prosocial, humoristic, aggressive, disruptive, and shy. The measure consisted of 15 items. It was modelled after Cassidy and Asher's (1992) teacher assessment instrument (with humor added as a fifth dimension). For each child teachers were asked to indicate on each item how characteristic the behavior in question was, using a five-point scale. The scale ranged from "never" to "always".

Peer assessments. The 8th grade students responded to five peer assessment items: a) prosocial ("Here are some persons who are kind and nice to others"); b) agressive ("---often get into quarrels with others in their class"); c) humorous (" -- are good to make others laugh"); d) disruptive ("-- want to be the boss and make all the decisions"); e) shy ("--do not like to take part in what the others are doing"). For each item students were asked to indicate all the classmates for whom the description applied.

Self assessment. Preschool children's perception of their own social behavior was measured by a 15 item questionnaire which parallelled the teacher assessment instrument. Items were changed from statements to questions, and children responded on a three-point scale ("yes", "no", "not sure"). School children responded on a five-point scale ranging from "true" to "not true" to a 14-item questionnaire focusing on skillful social behavior. This instrument was developed by Sletta and Skaalvik (unpublished data). Cronbach's alpha has previously been found to be .81 for 6th grade students and .88 for 9th grade students.

Results

Psychometric analyses. Table 1 shows the results of the internal reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) for different measures. The internal consistency was acceptable for all measures except preschool children's self measures of own humor, prosocial and internalizing behavior.

Table 1
Cronbach's alpha for the scales used

Scales/subscales	Preschool	Grade 4	Grade 8
Self measures			
Social behavior		.78	.82
Humor	.40	.69	.73
Prosocial	.34		
Aggressive	.70		
Disruptive	.80		
Internalizing	.35		
Teacher measures			
Humor	.78	.88	.90
Prosocial	.69		
Aggressive	.85		
Disruptive	.86		
Externalizing		.91	.95
Internalizing	.82	.82	.80

Note: The alpha coefficient was not calculated for teacher measure of prosocial behavior, as the scale had only two items.

An exploratory factor analysis showed that the 6 items in the teacher measures of disruptive and aggressive behavior in school children loaded on one single factor. Accordingly no distinction was made between disruptiveness and aggression in school children. The combination of aggressive and disruptive behavior is termed externalizing, and shyness is called internalizing behavior.

Correlates of humor in preschool children. Table 2 shows the correlations between preschool children's humor and their behavior and peer acceptance. No significant correlations were found between humor and peer acceptance or rejection. Humor as assessed by preschool teachers correlates positively with prosocial behavior (teacher measure) and negatively with internalizing behavior (teacher and self measure).

Table 2
Correlates of humor in preschool children

		HUMOR	
		Teacher measure	Self measure
BEHAVIOR	Prosocial	.36 (PS)*	-.12 (PS)
	Aggressive	.18 (PS)	.03 (PS)
Teacher	Internalizing	-.53 (PS)***	-.14 (PS)
measure	Disruptive	.10 (PS)	-.09 (PS)
	Prosocial	-.18 (PC)	.37 (PC)*
Self	Aggressive	.21 (PC)	.27 (PC)
measure	Internalizing	-.50 (PC)**	.47 (PC)**
	Disruptive	-.07 (PC)	.74 (PC)***
Peer acceptance		.19 (PC)	.33 (PC)
Peer rejection		.19 (PS)	-.10 (PS)

* P< .05 ** P< .01 *** P< .001
PS = polyserial correlation (continuous - ordinal)
PC = polychoric correlation (ordinal - ordinal)

However, self-assessed humor is not significantly related to any teacher measure of behavior but correlates positively with self-measures of prosocial, internalizing, and disruptive behavior. This pattern of relations indicates that self and teacher measures of humor and internalizing behavior in preschool children may be contradictory. A further inspection of the relationship between self and tacher measures shows that the correlations are for internalizing behavior .20 (not significant) and for humor -.37 (P<.05).

Empirical test of the theoretical model for school children. The proposed model was tested by using LISREL VII (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989) to obtain maximum likelihood estimates. Tests of the model were made separately for a) 4th grade students, b) 8th grade students/teacher measures, and c) 8th grade students/peer measures. The evidence obtained for the fit of the theoretical model was fairly satisfactory, the GFI indices being .930, .955, and .948. However, the highest standard residuals (in absolute values 2.56, 1.74, and 2.26 for a) to c) respectively) suggested a modification of the models by adding the following direct links from behavioral characteristics to preceived social competence: Externalizing to perceived peer acceptance and internalizing to perceived social behavior (a), externalizing to perceived social behavior (b), and prosocial to perceived social behavior (b and c). Since all of these relations were present as indirect links in the proposed model, the modifications suggested are consonant with the theoretical reasoning on which the model was based.

The models were first tested alternatively for the two sociometric criteria used (friendship and workmate) and the corresponding measures of perceived peer acceptance.

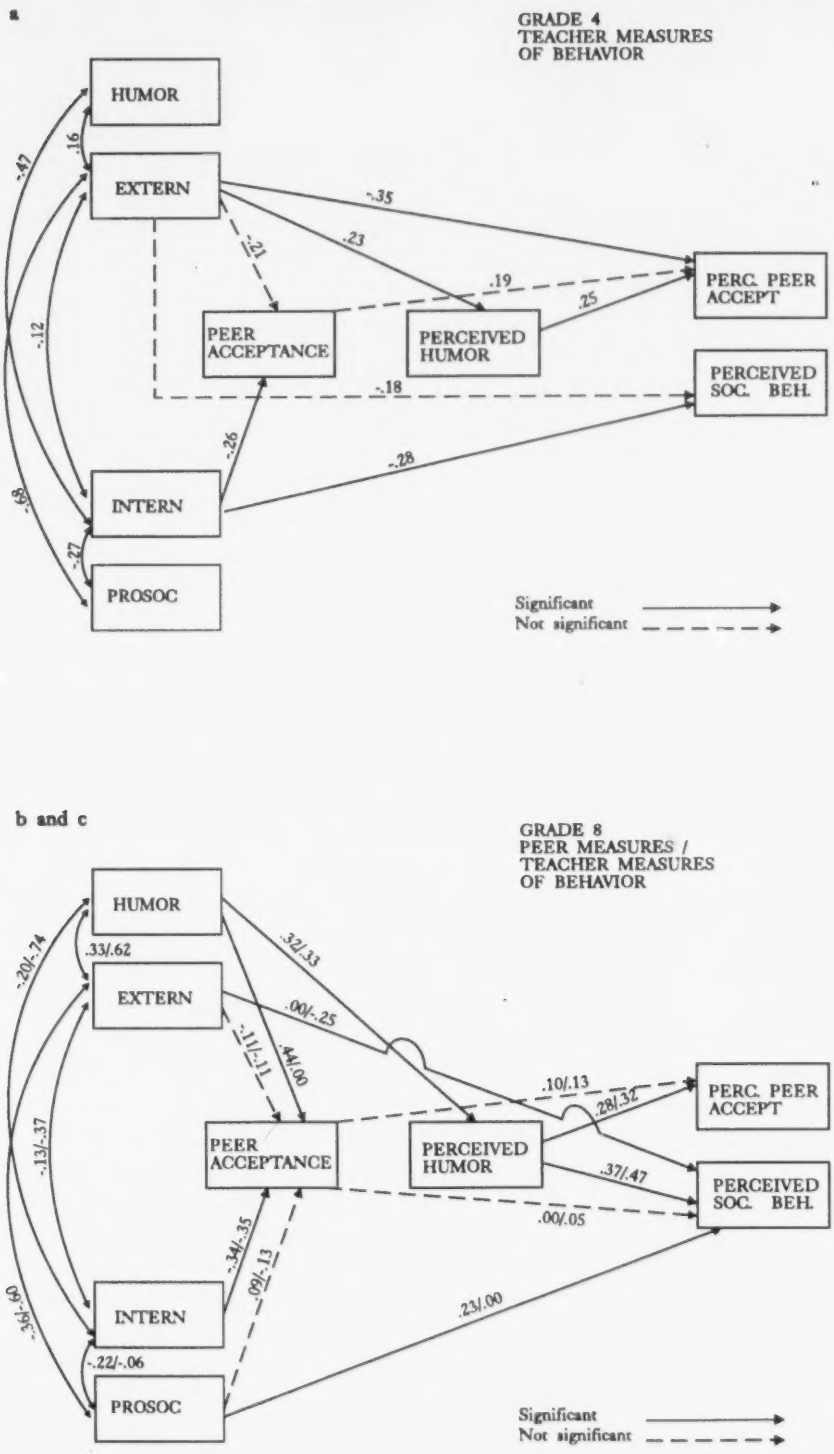

Figure 3. The relations between humor, behavioral characteristics, peer acceptance, and self-perceptions of humor and social competence

The differences found when comparing the results of these analyses were negligible, and we decided to report only the analyses based on data obtained when the friendship criterion was applied.

The modified models are shown in Figure 2. GFI-indices are satisfactory for all three models (.976, .971, and .961 for a to c respectively).

Figure 2 first shows the results for 4th grade students with teacher measures of humor and behavioral characateristics in model a). Contrary to expectations no paths are found from humor to peer acceptance or self-perceptions, but there is a significant path (t=2.3) from perceived humor to perceived peer acceptance. Internalizing behavior is predictive of peer acceptance (t= -2.4) and of perceived social behavior (t= -2.5). Significant paths go from externalizing behavior to perceived humor (t= 2.1) and to perceived peer acceptance (t= -3.2). A path going from peer acceptance to perceived peer acceptance is not significant (t=1.8).

For 8th grade students the two models (b and c) are combined in figure 2, with data specified for each model. In model b) no path is found for 8th grade students from humor (teacher measure) to peer acceptance, but a significant path (t=2.9) goes from humor to perceived humor. Peer acceptance is only predicted by internalizing behavior (t= -2.1), as the paths from externalizing and prosocial behavior to peer acceptance are not significant (t= -.5 and -.8). A significant path (t= -2.4) is found from externalizing behavior to perceived social behavior. Peer acceptance does not predict self-perceptions, as the only path found (to perceived social acceptance) is not significant (t=1.2). Perceived humor is clearly predictive of perceived peer acceptance (t=3.0) and perceived social behavior (t=4.5).

Model c) shows the results for 8th grade students with peer measures of humor and behavior. Humor based on peer assessment is clearly predictive of peer acceptance (t=4.3) and of the students' perception of their own humor (t=3.0). A significant path from internalizing behavior to peer acceptance is found (t= -3.6). There are paths from prosocial and externalizing behavior to peer acceptance, but they are not significant (t= .8 and -1.0 respectively). From peer acceptance there is a path to perceived peer acceptance, but it is not significant (t=.9). A significant path is found from prosocial behavior to perceived social behavior (t=2.2). Perceived humor is clearly predictive of perceived peer acceptance (t=2.5) and of perceived social behavior (t=3.7).

Discussion.

Based on theory and previous findings, children's humor was expected to affect their acceptance by peers and, directly or indirectly, their perception of own humor and social competence.

Contrary to expectation, no significant correlations were found between teacher or self measures of humor in preschool children and their acceptance or rejection by peers. The preschool teacher measure of children's humor has a high internal consistency, but the humor assessed by teachers in our study, may not be the kind of humor that is appreciated by the preschool children themselves. The internal consistency of the self measure of humor is low. Significant positive correlations between this measure of humor and self assessed disruptiveness and internalizing

behavior were found, but there were significant negative correlations between teacher measures of humor and internalizing behavior as assessed both by teachers and the children themselves. This inconsistent pattern of findings seems to contradict our expectations. However, the hypothesized effect of humor on peer acceptance is based on the assumption that children are more or less humorous, and that individual differences in humor production are fairly permanent over time. In general humor is highly appreciated, and it is a common tendency to overestimate one's own sense of humor, which is also the case among preschool children (Søbstad, 1990). This may affect correlations between the self measure of humor and other behavioral measures. Peer rejection and peer acceptance was not significantly related to humor. This may indicate that self and teacher measures of humor in the preschool group do not give the best estimates of the influence of humor on social behavior. Peer assessment might perhaps be a better alternative.

At 4th grade level (Model a) humor as assessed by teachers is not predictive of peer acceptance or self perceptions of humor and social competence. Thus basic links proposed in our theoretical model are missing. At 8th grade level (Model b) humor as assessed by teachers is predictive of perceived humor, but the hypothesized link from humor to peer acceptance is still missing. However, humor as assessed by peers (Model c) is predictive of peer acceptance and perception of own humor, consistent with our theoretical model. This indicates that teachers' perception or appreciation of humor is different from that of their students. Humor as perceived and assessed by teachers, may not be the same kind of humor as the humor that is highly appreciated by classmates and which is predictive of peer acceptance. Teachers tend to be preoccupied with externalizing behavior in their classrooms, and thus humor in externalizing children may be readily perceived by teachers. Correlations between humor and externalizing behavior are .62 when based on teacher measures (Model b) and .32 when assessed by peers (Model c). This difference may be indicative of a selective tendency in teacher perceptions as suggested. Since externalizing behavior tends to have an adverse influence on peer acceptance, humor in externalizing children may not be highly appreciated by peers. In our models negative links were found from externalizing behavior to peer acceptance, but the paths were not significant. However, the strength of tendencies found is dependent on the total pattern of links within the model.

Peer acceptance is not predictive of perceived social competence, as the paths found are not significant. Although strong links were not expected, the absence of significant paths is surprising. It is hard to believe that children's perception of own social competence is not in some way or other affected by peer acceptance, but effects may be indirect. In the search for a better understanding of this we suggest that future research look for an emotional mediator which is not included in our present theoretical model.

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